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Characters: Portraits by Robert Weaver

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CHARACTERS: PORTRAITS BY ROBERT WEAVER
As part of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery’s responsibility and mission to reflect and document the historical development of the visual arts of the United States, we have a commitment to respond to those artists within our own region who contribute to that development. It is within this context that we present Characters: Portraits by Robert Weaver as one of the Sheldon Solo series. Lincoln artist, Robert Weaver, has established a regional reputation for his artistic effort and achievements, but he also has become a well-known “character” because of his artistic independence and personality. This current exhibition focuses on Weaver’s recent highly charged and bold portrait paintings of local, powerful and influential individuals that capture the subjects/personalities with directness and honesty, often revealing the nature of both the artist and the sitter.

Many portraits have been commissioned, but not painted to gratify vanity. These expressionist paintings are confrontational in their physicality through surface texture, energy and scale, and in their unequivocal gesture and frontal placement of the subject/sitter. Through the artist’s deliberate simplification, stylization and exaggeration of the physical characteristics of the sitter, these paintings evoke feeling rather than describe nature. Weaver works in the modern tradition of expressionist figurative artists such as Chaim Soutine and Lucien Freud in which the painting reveals as much about the artist’s feeling toward the subject—which results in his portraits being imbued with great poignancy and emotional objectivity.

The following is an excerpt from a recent interview of the artist, Robert Weaver, by George W. Neubert, curator of the exhibition.

GWN: As I understand it, you studied first at the Kansas City Art Institute and then came here to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to receive your MFA. Are there instructors or artists that you have looked to when you think about your own painting?

RW: Yes, there are a couple. Before I went to a formal art school I attended the school of hard knocks for several years. I was twenty-five years old before I started professional training. Five years before I went to the Kansas City Art Institute I started doing art, drawing and painting. Van Gogh comes to mind as the first impressive artist’s work that I could relate to. Also I like Edward Munch a lot. However, earlier I was an abstract painter, an abstract expressionist and I went through Cubism and the Jackson Pollock stuff before I even went to the Art Institute. I had an exhibition in St. Louis before I went to the Art Institute. The critic of the St. Louis Dispatch said it included a little of everything from realism to abstract expressionism, the whole gamut. He said it looked like there were about 35 different Robert Weavers represented. That comment reminds me of a thing that Theo Van Gogh said of his brother Vincent’s work that “every time he looked at a group of paintings he could tell which was Vincent’s work.” I think that is probably the same kind of thing. It is all learning at that stage but as you get older then things start to clarify.

GWN: But your mature work combines aspects of expressionism, realism and figuration.

RW: Yes, well you see all of those trends can also be applied to describing Abstract Expressionism.

GWN: How about contemporary figurative painters such as Lucien Freud or new figuration?

RW: Oh, I like his work. His limited palette is a lot like what an old instructor at the Art Institute used to make us work from. He called it a low-key palette. He stole all that from Cezanne. Then he also had a high-key palette from Matisse. Needless to say I fought with this instructor.

GWN: I wouldn’t describe your palette as low-key.

RW: No, but it was a discipline thing at that stage in my development and I just didn’t like to have restrictions put on me. Learning how to mix colors is important in teaching, I guess. I used to utilize all kinds of color on my palette, any and every thing I could get away with. My theory was I didn’t like to take time to mix a color palette. By the time you look at the palettes in the canvas your ideas of what you were going to put down might have changed just like...
Coach Bob Devaney 1988, oil on canvas, 96 x 72 in.

Christina Hixson & Dog, 1992, oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in.

Self Portrait, 1986, oil on canvas, 38 x 48 in.

Ernst Lied, 1990, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.
Both. I prefer painting a person I have a
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Can you say why you have preferred

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these individuals as subjects for your

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region. However most of your paintings

give you an added punch.

GWN: But drawing remains fund­
amental to your creative process?

RW: Yes, but drawing people can be
very difficult. People are the hardest
subjects to paint and the hardest to draw.
Though I have been an artist for thirty
some years, it never gets any easier. You
might get a little better at it but it doesn’t
get any easier. I still draw a lot. I haven’t
done much printmaking in the last few
years. However, I don't like to work in
just one medium. I like to do several
things simultaneously.

GWN: It seems that many artists within
the Heartland have most often chosen to
paint the land - the landscape/sky of this
region. However most of your paintings
have always included people. Your work
has been dominated by portraits of indi­

Can you say why you have preferred
these individuals as subjects for your
paintings?

RW: It seems most local artists paint
landscapes all the time. Not taking away
from landscapes - I painted landscapes.
However, I feel people are more inter­

ing and challenging to paint. Though
my portraits are fairly good, that doesn’t
mean I don't have to work for it. Some of
these portraits are people I like, and
people I don’t like, and I have painted
both. I prefer painting a person I have a
positive feeling for more than someone
who just wants a commissioned portrait,
which can become a problem. Sometimes
I will put them off and sometimes I just
don't have time for them.

GWN: Well I think you are hitting on
the theme and title of the exhibition
"Characters."

RW: Well that is a good description of
my portraits. That is a good title. When
I was a youngster, I read a lot of comic
books and wanted to be a cartoonist at
that time. Then I got into wildlife
illustration and later became a profes­

GWN: So you think this early interest
in cartoons is an aspect of being drawn
to people who are "individuals" as
subjects for your art?

RW: Yes, cartoons made an important
impression in my life as many things in
life do at a very early age. I wanted to
be an artist/cartoonist. That was in the
war years and there was a lot of
Nationalism. Hitler was depicted as a
bad guy, and Superman and Batman as
good guys. Those exaggerated
characteristics made a big impression on
me. Yes, I think of characters.

GWN: When I hear the word charac­
ters I also think of caricature, of physical
characteristics that are emphasized or
distorted to make a deliberate visual
point or punctuate a known reality.

RW: Whether it is deliberate or
subconscious I think those things get
into your work whether you want them
to or not. That is why talking about why
I do this and why I don't do that in
painting - sometime it gets in there
whether you want it to or not.

GWN: So your own attitude and
feelings toward the sitter become part of
the painting.

RW: I think it shows in some way,
shape or form and I don't know whether
you have a great deal of control over
that. I have scraped off paint and
should have left it because it came out
the same way the second time and the
third time around. Paintings have a
tendency to grow on you. They
physically get larger than life. I have
always liked to paint big, and besides,
painting small is very hard. One of the
smallest paintings in the exhibition was
the hardest thing I ever painted.

GWN: Is that because of the scale or
the individual/subject?

RW: I think it was a little of both.
Somebody said it was difficult because
you know the sitter too well. The
subject of this portrait laughed when I
told him that, but I think knowledge and
feeling toward the subject gets in there
whether you want it to or not.
ever, you seem to capture his personality, or should I say character.

**RW:** I went to Las Vegas to visit with Christina Hixson and I talked to her a lot about him. In addition I learned a lot about what Mr. Lied was like by interviewing several people who knew him well. I was also provided a few snapshots of him that weren’t very good. The photograph that they finally gave me to work from was the worst photograph I ever had to work from for a portrait painting. They ought to give me the medal of honor for that painting. Nobody else could have done it. That sounds arrogant but that is exactly the way I feel.

**GWN:** You really get a sense of a personality when you stand in front of that painting.

**RW:** Well, yes. You know when you “got” them and you know when you don’t. If I hadn’t captured his personality, that painting wouldn’t be there. It would have been 86’d a long time ago. I had a hell of a time getting what he was all about - I think I did. All that stuff is in the painting and after a while you do know the man - you know something about him.

**GWN:** How about Coach Devaney’s portrait for the UNL Athletic Department?

**RW:** Actually, I did about three paintings of him. One I destroyed, and the other one was the largest one. I started that painting three times. I tried him with hats, but I learned he doesn’t like hats because he was always losing them. I tried a black and white painting and it didn’t work and then the third time around I got it. Don Bryant came out and looked at the finished painting and said “oh, you got that Irish sparkle in his eye and everything.” I felt very good about it. Devaney also liked his portrait. I feel it is historically a very important painting.

**GWN:** Well, I think it is interesting that you have said when you painted the Devaney portrait you weren’t trying to capture Devaney during a particular time or place, but you were dealing with Devaney as a legend covering a twenty-plus-year-period and what he brought to this community and the University football program.

**RW:** I think that painting will be there long after you or I. It was several years before the University got around to honoring him and it came at a good time.
Robert Weaver was born on September 9, 1935, in Stilwell, Kansas. He received his B.F.A. degree from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1965, and his M.F.A. degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1968. Weaver has received several academic awards, including the Tamarind Lithography Printer Fellowship from the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Inc. in 1966, and the William Vreeland Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1967. Group exhibitions that have included examples of Weaver's work include the 23rd National Graphic Arts and Drawing Exhibition, Wichita Art Association, Wichita, Kansas, in 1967; the National Print and Drawing Exhibition at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, in 1968; the Contemporary Figurative Painting in the Midwest Invitational Exhibition at the Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, in 1977; and Trains and Other Things at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1979. Weaver's work has been showcased in solo exhibitions at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1972; Slippery Rock State College, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, 1973; and the Center for the Visual Arts Gallery, Illinois State University, Bloomington, Illinois, 1978. Robert Weaver's work may be found in numerous public collections, including the St. Louis Art Museum in St. Louis, Missouri; the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska; and the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Nebraska.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:
Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

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